

Generation Z: Visual Self-Governance through Photography

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Abstract. Zambia is presented to the West through prevailing visual narratives of Africa's population growth, epidemics and poverty. This continual overexposure to similar images creates a familiarity with a visual narrative which is rarely questioned and often feeds into a narrative of 'Afro-pessimism'. Everyday life, however, as experienced by Zambia's growing affluent middle class in its urban centers, could not be further from these preconceived images. I have been photographing the series Generation Z in Zambia's capital Lusaka since 2016, and am documenting the rapidly developing city. This chapter explores the photographic series for its representational function, as well as its engagement with extant theoretical perspectives on Africa. It is critical that new photographic work contributes to the displacement of stereotypes and encourages viewers to contemplate the development processes of a country. Many post-colonial countries were, until now, denied access to photographic education, their own visual history and the research into visual self-governance. However, this lack of research about photographic image production in Zambia in itself does not mean that there was no image production. In my series Generation Z, I attempt to combine the acknowledgement of my own Western visual heritage with the experience of extended stays in Lusaka. I ask viewers to contemplate change in Zambia and dismantle neocolonial visual discourses. I contend that it is important not to return to the limited visual research material available, and to not use outdated reference material from the 'colonial libraries', as that in itself would not acknowledge the 'uncited' recent developments.

Keywords: Visual Self-Governance, photography, practice research, Zambia, representation, colonial library

Introduction

Zambia, officially the Republic of Zambia, is a landlocked country in Southern Africa, neighboring the Democratic Republic of Congo to the north, Tanzania to the north-east, Malawi to the east, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia to the south, and Angola to the west. It has a peaceful and democratic recent history and its economic fortunes depend on commodity prices like copper. As a country, it has stayed largely under the radar of international news agencies.

According to Scott Martin (2017), only one study was conducted on the representation of Zambia in the media between 1950 and 2012. In his research, Martin looks at the wider representation of Africa in the media, and argues that “existing research into US and UK representations of Africa [have] a remarkably narrow focus on a specific number of countries, events, media and texts” (p. 203) and that apart from the representation of key events such as the 1994 Rwanda genocide or the collapse of the Apartheid system, “we know almost nothing about how the majority of the continent is covered by most US and UK media, most of the time.” (p. 203)

Because of the limited visual material available about Zambia, the country is perceived by Western audiences through prevailing narratives of Africa through images of population growth, epidemics and poverty; however, everyday life, as experienced by Zambia’s growing affluent middle class in its urban centers, could not be further from these preconceived images. These factors make Zambia a key location in which to explore the idea of Visual Self-Governance in low income countries.

The term of self-governance in an African context describes an emancipation of local and national politics, trying to shed postcolonial and resist neocolonial governance structures, which have their roots in colonial rule. These governmental structures remained embedded within the newly formed nations. In most African countries, independence did not lead to a restructure of local and national governance and therefore the newly established governments largely reproduce ‘things’, in a Foucauldian sense. Foucault (1978) suggests that “what government has to do with is not territory but, rather, a sort of complex composed of men and things” (p.208). In his essay on *Governmentality* he states:

The things, in a sense, with which government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrications with those things that are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, and so on; men in their relation to those other things that are customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking and so on; and finally men in relation to those still other things that might be accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death and so on. (p. 208)

I argue that *visual self-governance* can study representations of relationships between men and things and can eloquently question legacy power structures that have stayed static in post-colonial Africa. Visual self-governance contributes clearly to how relations between men and things, and therefore governments, are understood both by its citizens and outside observers. Currently much visual material depicting low income countries evokes colonial narratives relating to *things* from the past. Nevertheless, the visual arts have the

capacity to contradict or reject colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial narratives and artistic practices are often influenced by local and national narratives. The visual relationship of people in low income countries and *things* have until now often been depicted by non-domestic media. The ability for citizens to define and challenge these relationships through self-governing the image will allow for a representation of the self, for most as a person but will also influence how audiences see.

It is therefore important for artists to be involved in the development of self-governance both by creating new imagery exploring the relationship between men and ‘non-colonial’ *things*, but also re-contextualizing historic material. Visual self-governance allows practitioners and audiences to break with static narratives and allows for new cultural realities to evolve.

As a practicing artist/photographer and researcher I juxtapose practice with theory and theory with practice, as theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time as practice is informed by theory. This research process can be complex in nature. It is a generative enquiry that draws on interdisciplinary and emergent methodologies which have the potential to extend definitions on how new knowledge is produced.

I have been photographing the series *Generation Z* in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, since 2016, and am documenting modern life in the rapidly developing city. The series documents the experience of a new wealthy section of society by photographing environments such as shopping centers, ballet classes and family gatherings.

To a Western audience, the images look strangely familiar, as if they might have been photographed in one of the urban centers in the United Kingdom or United States. The images, at first glance, are street photographs, and refer to known canons of visual references, both historical and contemporary. However, upon further investigation, the images provide hints as to where they have been taken: the fast food chains are not familiar; the light is glaring; and even the street furniture is markedly different. It becomes clear that these images have been produced in Africa. It is at this point that the apparently ordinary becomes unfamiliar, and doesn’t meet expectations of the viewer.

My photographic work should not be regarded as illustrations complementing the theoretical text, but rather explore how the process of making will challenge more traditional notions of research. My practice seeks eloquence in its own right and reveals insights that are only possible through artistic and photographic process. The process values intuition and experience, which I draw upon during the making of these images. The photographs themselves hereby propose a discourse and exploration with the theoretical research material in this chapter.



Fig. 1. Supermarket in Lusaka - From the photographic series Generation Z (original in color).



Fig. 2. Ballet Class - From the photographic series Generation Z (original in color).

Uncited Visual Narratives

The Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe argued in his seminal book *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (1988), that audiences often take their references from a narrow pool of narratives, which cite existing references from a colonial library (p.195). This concept of the colonial library can also be transferred to the visual and refers to images of poverty, under-development, disease, and black people who are generally represented as voiceless.

We can find a similar observation again nearly thirty years later when Columbia University professor Howard W. French, a veteran New York Times correspondent and expert for West and Central Africa, bemoans this anachronistic style of coverage in modern American journalism on the subject of Africa. In 2015, he wrote to the CBS News flagship program *60 Minutes*, to express his concerns about their coverage: “Africans are limited to the role of passive victims, or occasionally brutal and corrupt villains and incompetents; they are not otherwise shown to have any agency or even the normal range of human thoughts and emotions” (French, 2015).

It can be argued that this representation of Africa is deliberately nourished by stories that tap into colonial history, often simplistically playing off white against black, rich against poor, the powerful against the powerless and the people with a voice against the voiceless. These juxtapositions make for easy story writing, sit comfortably within the canon of post-colonial narratives and are simple to produce and sell. This form of narrative will persist as long as viewers do not accept that that the stories are much more nuanced than the Western media wants us to believe, and as long Africa does not produce images and stories themselves. As Homi Bhabha suggests, as long as “one silence uncannily repeats the other, the sign of identity and reality found in the work of the empire is slowly undone” (1994, p. 124). Similarly, Guido Rings (2016) argues in *Otherness in Contemporary European Cinema* that news coverage of Africa is no coincidence but stems from historic and colonial narratives, which are deliberately evoked again and again:

On a representational level, this implies the continuity of binary constructs within which former colonizers and succeeding national elites tend to portray themselves to formally colonized or neo-colonized ‘Others’ as rational, civilized, and male representatives of a superior order, which leaves more instinctive, barbarian, and female roles for the Others. (p. 14)

There is a growing interest in a more emancipated visual self-representation of the African continent in mainstream media like the Marvel film *Black Panther* (2018), which features an heroic, all-black cast in a fictional African country. Other examples include photographers Pieter Hugo and Zanele Muholi, who explore their South African heritage and identity through their work and have been invited into the Western art scene as representatives of the continent. Despite these instances of cultural engagement with the African continent, it seems that the discourses that sparked Mudimbe's definition of the 'colonial library' persist. One could therefore state that this continual overexposure to similar images creates a familiarity with a visual narrative which is not questioned, but rather remains static, often feeding into a narrative of 'Afro-pessimism'.

Afro-pessimism refers to the influence these visual narratives still have on the whole African continent and how power structures are shaped through preexisting narratives of the continent. Many Zambian artists and photographers are painfully aware of the discrepancy between the stories they need to tell, and those which are told about them.

This quest for visual self-governance and more current representation is not unique to Zambia or the African continent. We have witnessed subtle and steady changes in perception of countries such as South Korea, Jamaica or even Australia over the years. At the beginning of the 21st century India also began the debate on how to take control of the internal and external representation and Indian media houses took an active part in changing perceptions. In 2005, picture editor Bandeep Singh from India's largest news magazine *India Today* made the point that their magazine chose to no longer visually emphasize the depiction of poverty but showcase a more diverse India and therefore allow a debate on self-representation and visual self-governance of the nation (B. Singh, personal communication, February 10, 2018).

Zambia might be at a similar point now where it is ready to reevaluate its image. It will be important to document how far and how fast views on Zambia shift when Zambian or other African photographers take over. We will see the deconstruction of Western ideologies like Afro-pessimism only when nations recognize the importance of their own visual representation.

From the time of its invention, photography has been used to support guided ideologies about people and countries. The medium lends itself to documenting faraway, foreign places, which many people might never otherwise have the chance to see for themselves. Such images rely upon the interpretation of the traveling photographers. All too often, with specific markets in mind, photographers seek out what an audience is already familiar with and feeds existing expectations and assumptions. Therefore, established narratives can take a long time to shift.

Documentary photography, in its heyday, was predicated on a principle that the photographer's nationality did not matter (Sontag, p. 31). As Sontag describes, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "The photographer's nationality and national journalistic affiliation were, in principle, irrelevant." (p. 31) Historically, it was important what they were willing to endure and where they were willing to go. Photographers made their living by being closely connected to established media markets, and by building networks with editors and publishers. The celebrated photographic agency Magnum was founded in 1947 by a group of white European men.

This is still largely true today. Photographers from the African continent only represent a tiny number of photographers whose work is published and recognized. In 2017, the *World Press Photo Awards*, one of the most recognized industry awards, saw according to its Technical Report 5034 photographers submitting 80,408 images (World Press Photo Contest Technical Report, 2017, p. 2), but only two percent were from African photographers and only one African photographer was amongst the prize winners. Even in 2014, at the height of the Ebola Crisis in West Africa, there was only one African photographer awarded (2017, p. 11). Nevertheless, most of the images in the competition come from what Susan Sontag describes as "memorable sites of suffering" in Asia and Africa (2004, p.33)

It is this lack of control over a nation's own image and its depiction in the media outlets which highlights where the power over the image lies. Power lies not with individual photographers, but the national and private cultural institutions that the photographer operates within. These cultural institutions need to actively work towards a broader representation and need to recognize the importance of visual self-governance, rather than relying on the 'colonial library' as a reference.

Furthermore, it becomes now apparent that, as Andrea Ballatore, Mark Graham and Shilad Sen suggest, "a few countries in the Global North play an inordinately large role in defining the digital augmentations of the Global South" (2017, p. 19). A search for 'Zambia Photo' on the Yahoo site reveals a narrow set of images: African wild life, simple food and images of poor children in rural areas. Google produced a similar set of images, with a greater focus on Western tourists observing landscapes and wildlife. There is no recognizable imagery that might be considered as unique to Zambia. In this regard, Google images of Zambia the wider visual narrative of Africa - its bush landscapes and wild life – with which Western audiences are familiar. According to Ballatore, Graham and Sen (2017), content about the geographic South is mostly produced in the geographic North, because:

since the company's creation in 1998, Google's algorithms have tended to favor highly central Web content: Pages linked to by a lot of

other pages are prioritized, and those largely ignored are demoted in the rankings. This creates a worrying situation whereby it becomes difficult for those on the information peripheries to break out of their digital marginality (p.19)

It is this digital marginality – and questions around its intentionality or existence as a byproduct of the digitization of knowledge – that re-emphasizes that there are degrees of access to knowledge. Even with existence of technical capabilities to provide access to all knowledge to all humans, this knowledge is filtered. For our own convenience, we accept this filtering, often without considering the discourses it is replicating. Research is only just beginning on who does not have access to the information and how this impacts on knowledge creation. As digital content in countries like the UK and US grows exponentially, the margins of the world wide web are still broadly unexposed.

In *The Cited and the Uncited: Towards an Emancipatory Reading of Representations of Africa* (2012) Garuba and Himmelman argue that Edward Said's definition of Orientalism, as "a system for citing texts and authors" (p. 23), also plays out in the visual culture by quoting the 'colonial library'. Images which do not quote from the colonial library could be envisioned as a step towards an emancipatory reading of representations of Africa (p.17), and are referred to as 'uncited' by Garuba and Himmelman.

The 'uncited' can be conceptualized as a "blank, uninscribed space, that is still outside of discursive representation" (Garuba & Himmelman, 2012, p. 17). The question then arises; whether these blank, uninscribed places, are being willfully left blank, or if ignorance is a valid excuse for an unwillingness to engage?

It is critical that new work fills some of these blank spaces and starts to displace the visual cultural and political myths that have become entrenched, and asks viewers to contemplate the development processes of a country. In my work, I am concentrating on the urban narrative, which is currently under-represented, and therefore can offer an additional interpretation of the contemporary African experience.

Samantha Wehbi and Deane Taylor (2012) argue that:

Holding on to an awareness of our potential to reproduce problematic North/South power relations, and taking on the responsibility of anti-colonial resistance, we have the possibility of producing alternative images that involve creating representations that reflect the attempts of people from the North and South to work together in solidarity to resist the dominant neocolonial discourses of our time. (p. 537)

Therefore, documenting the modern urban life in Lusaka questions what development means for African cities. It juxtaposes the celebration of ambition and consumerism of middle class Africa with the concern that the continent will assimilate to neoliberal ideals. One could argue that the remaining ‘otherness’ of Africa gives the continent a distinct and unique character and that an assimilation to Western ideals will create sustainability issues the West is all too familiar with.

Visual Self-Governance through Photography

In collaboration with the Mass Communication department at the University of Zambia, which began in 2009, we developed an under graduate curriculum for photography to foster visual self-governance. The curriculum addresses the need to heighten visual literacy amongst the student populace and supports them to find their own voice. The collaboration brought together the structure of a well-established Western photography course with the need of a de-colonialized, country specific curriculum.

In my series *Generation Z*, I attempt to combine the acknowledgement of my own Western visual heritage with the experience of extended stays in Lusaka. I ask viewers to contemplate change in Zambia and dismantle neocolonial visual discourses. There is a real interest in Zambia to see an alternative representation of the country. The interest was for images less laden with colonial and post-colonial references; images that were shaking off the burden of representation, and which were less attached to a post-colonial narrative.

In August 2017, the *Generation Z* series was exhibited at the Henry Tayali Gallery in Zambia, by invitation of the Visual Arts Council of Zambia. The *Generation Z* series was originally aimed at a Western audience, however, it also sparked debate amongst Zambian photographers on how to develop methods of showing a wider, more diverse view of their country, which highlights its unique character. The discussions highlighted that Zambia’s visual identity outside the country, and to some extent within the country, is often based on a stereotypical African narrative, which was felt not to reflect life experienced within Zambia. It is therefore not a question of if my photographs are the ‘correct’ representation of modern Africa, but if they contribute to the debate on how Zambia could be represented. These images sparked a debate on the dangers of neo-liberal consumerism on African culture and what this means to the people of Zambia, but also illustrated the visual ‘proof’ of the so often demanded economic progress of an African nation. It highlights the chasm between Zambians’ daily experience of their urban lives in Lusaka, and the photographs they see of themselves in the international media.

Through my previous work with the University of Zambia and the Visual Arts Council, I was also asked to run a two-week workshop parallel with the exhibition with a group of photographers with a range of different backgrounds. The participants were commercial photographers, fine artists, photo journalists and a filmmaker. In the workshop, we developed a dialogue about how Zambia could be represented, and how photographers can contribute to the development of a visual narrative of a nation that will allow them to work toward visual self-governance. Gerald Mwale, photojournalism lecturer at the University of Zambia, observed that “photography is, in fact, a way to better understand one’s surroundings” (2017). We therefore discussed the current visual post-colonial representation of Africa and specifically Zambia and developed strategies on how to heighten the awareness of the continuous reference to the ‘colonial library’.

By revisiting the historic and current theoretical texts as part of my research, I established that there is a long-standing awareness for the need of a more diverse representation of Africa, but also a distinct lack of action to address the problem.

In Zambia, poor access to research materials, the lack of engagement by the Zambian academic community and the absence of funding for research into visual representation can be cited as the key factors that limited local research has been done.

This combined with the disinterest of more established research centres in the West created a vacuum that allowed the status quo to fester for many decades. If this non-engagement with the questions about the representation of Africa is a deliberate act to keep power structures in place also needs further investigation.

In my photographic practice, I reacted intuitively to these issues. Working both in practice and theory allowed me to explore these theoretical concepts, visualizing some of the more challenging questions laid out in this chapter.

My photographs document the everyday, the unsensational and often unnoticed moments of societal change in Lusaka. The nature of photography, the recording of split seconds of time, allows the recognition that change has occurred.

Zambian artists and photographers in the workshop discussions were unsure if the simple everyday was worthwhile recording, if these everyday activities warranted a large-scale exhibition. They questioned the purpose of recording the ordinary, as the ordinary was kept private for many decades, not worth discussing within the established theoretical framework of self-representation. Zambia had been, until now, only represented by the extraordinary, the wild life, waterfalls and various stereotypical depictions of the poor, which most

Zambians do not recognize as a true depiction of their country. It is the contradiction of the ordinary that is *uncited* and the extraordinary that is *cited*, that is discussed in my practical work.



Fig. 3. Street Scene - From the photographic series Generation Z (original in color).

Further research on if and how the established theoretical framework can contribute to the debate of visual self-governance in Zambia, and, if this framework is fit for purpose still needs to be conducted, as, at the moment, most research on visual representation is about low income countries rather than engaging in a meaningful dialogue with the countries.

I contend that, because of the lack of information, it is important for researchers like myself not to return to the limited research material available, and to not use outdated reference material from the ‘colonial libraries’, as that in itself would not acknowledge the ‘uncited’ visual practices which happened over the last sixty years. The lack of research about photographic image production in Zambia in itself does not mean that there was no image production.

Nigerian art critic Okwui Enwezor, who curated the Venice Biennale in 2015, spoke at the event Who do you think you are? Culture, identity and the contemporary art museum (2017), organized by the Stuart Hall Foundation, about the responsibility galleries have to national audiences and how they need to take responsibility for decolonizing art production in their countries. There is therefore a need to invest in national photographic institutions, which are able to build the foundations for a discourse about Zambia’s media image, and

develop new approaches which do not make the colonial past the central argument, but invest in its own visual history; and build national archives from disperse collections that are degrading or getting lost as time passes. It is therefore urgent to do this archival research work now.

This need for urgency to preserve the visual heritage and record the rapid societal change of Zambia also needs action from higher education institutions to train a visually literate and critical workforce, which can preserve these invaluable and historic documents. Toussaint Nothias (2014) argues that otherwise the danger is that this blank space will be filled by generic imagery with neither historic nor cultural relevance to the country. It is therefore important that African nations find their own visual narrative as otherwise “African identities and the continent’s future are visualized in the increasingly homogenized and generic visual language of global neoliberalism.” (p.336)

In a time where we are flooded with images and it is said that we no longer need photography as everything has been photographed already, it is important to understand that these statements come from a privileged, but limited Western perspective. This perspective does not take into account the fact that many post-colonial countries were, until now, denied access to photographic education, their own visual history and the research into visual self-governance. As this research still has to be done, we still might find other icons of African photography, similar to Seydou Keita or Malick Sidibe in Mali.

This chapter therefore suggests that much more will need to be done to understand and support the ways in which Zambia, and Africa in general, visually represents its own communities and countries. It highlights factors that constrained this development until now. I hope that this chapter will be useful to the photographic and academic community of Zambia as they foster self-representation and visual self-governance of their nation.

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